

## Case Study: Decision Making on Public Sector Services

### Introduction

NOAA's Policy on Partnerships in the Provision of Environmental Information (<http://weather.gov/partnershippolicy>) highlights the complementary roles of NOAA, other government agencies, the private sector, and academic/research entities in the nation's environmental information enterprise. NOAA recognizes the public interest is served by the ability of private sector entities and the academic and research community to provide diverse services to meet the varied needs of specific individuals, organizations, and economic entities. The policy is intended to strengthen the partnership among government, academia and the private sector.

Meeting the full range of potential needs for expertise in applying environmental information is well beyond the Government's capacity in general, and NOAA in particular. The partnership policy impacts NOAA decision-makers as they must carefully consider where other entities are providing services, how NOAA actions impact other entities in the environmental information enterprise, and whether NOAA is competing with these entities when products or services not related to NOAA's mission.

In broad terms, NOAA's mission includes both protection of life and property and the enhancement of the economy. There may be cases when these two goals (protection and enhancement of economy) are in tension. For example should the mission goal of fostering the economy suggest that NOAA not provide "customized" services which commercial entities could provide despite the added protection that these services may provide? NOAA's decisions must seek to balance these goals, with the ultimate standard (from the partnership policy) to "give due consideration to [the abilities of other entities in the enterprise] and consider the effects of [NOAA] decisions on the activities of these entities, in accordance with its responsibilities as an agency of the U.S. Government, to serve the public interest and advance the nation's environmental information enterprise as a whole." It can be difficult to determine what actions best serve the public interest.

This hypothetical case study is designed to illustrate how difficult it can be to live up to the standard established by the partnership policy. It draws on an actual service which the National Weather Service (NWS) provides on an experimental basis, but adds hypothetical comments on this service to illustrate the full range of views which NWS decision makers may have to consider.

### Outputs

Course participants are asked to put themselves in the position of an NWS decision maker who has received comments on this service and must decide whether NWS should commit to continue this service as a permanent operational product, discontinue the service, or take some other action. Participants should be prepared to justify their decision, including responding to the hypothetical comments – both those supporting and opposing the decision proposed.

### Ground Rules

One of the course instructors will be available to answer questions you might have about NWS and/or NOAA policies, or other matters of fact about how NWS/NOAA operates. The instructor may also answer questions about the case study itself. However, the instructor will not suggest a decision for you in this case.

## Attachment 1 – Hypothetical Case Example: Weather Activity Planner

**Background:** The National Weather Service (NWS) provides a variety of information on its web pages including observations, forecasts, and warnings. Most of the forecast information is now derived from a digital data base containing a 5x5 Km grid of forecast values of temperature, winds, precipitation, etc. over the next week. This example is an interactive interface to this underlying data in the National Digital Forecast Database (NDFD). In general, this kind of interactive interface creates more challenging issues regarding the partnership policy than more traditional “static” NWS products.

**Proposed NOAA Information Service:** “Weather Activity Planner.” This web-based, GIS-enabled page allows users to either click on a map or enter latitude and longitude coordinates to indicate the location of interest. The user can then enter a value range of interest for a number of weather parameters, such as temperature, humidity, probability of precipitation, wind speed, wind direction and sky cover. Submitting the location and parameter information will actively query underlying NDFD grids to find when the requested weather requirements will be met at the nearest grid point over the next seven days, i.e. when the weather is expected to fall within the selected range of values for each parameter selected. The user then sees a chart colored to show each selected parameter (see attached graphic).

### **Public Comments Received** (All of these comments are purely hypothetical!):

Assume there were 1,000 comments received, of which 800 supported continuing the service, 100 opposed, and 100 offered other comments (e.g. technical suggestions) with the following comments taken as a representative sample of various types of comments:

- X “A nice way to query your publicly-available digital forecast database without spending money on a private consultant. Thanks for looking out for us little guys.”
- X “The weather planner goes beyond merely broadcasting your forecasts and warnings. It allows users to generate the kind of customized weather "advice" which is the bread and butter of our business. Our clients include construction companies who are now starting to use your weather event planner to decide when to schedule construction activities such as pouring concrete. Please stop.”
- X “This is a great service. As a Scoutmaster it helps me plan weekend activities to keep my scout troop safe and pack the gear we need to live up to the Scout motto – Be Prepared. Keep it up.”
- X “I am the CEO of Weather Services R Us. My company has a product which does exactly the same thing as the Weather Planner. We’ve had it on our website for the past 2 years. Why is NOAA competing with us?”
- X “I used the weather planner to decide which day to take vacation to work on my patio, and it worked out great. Without it I could have easily wasted a vacation day sitting around watching it rain.”
- X “One of my constituents has brought to my attention a service called the Weather Activity Planner which is provided by the National Weather Service (NWS). I understand NWS is considering whether to continue this service. My constituent provides an almost identical service, and believes this service is an inappropriate use of taxpayer funds to compete with his business. As Chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Science, the Departments of State, Justice, and Commerce, and Related Agencies, I find it most disturbing that NWS is wasting appropriated funds to support this unwarranted competition with the private sector. I urge you to discontinue this service immediately.”

- X “As a state land management agency, the WP is helpful to us to plan when the weather -- particularly wind speed, direction, and temperature -- is best for doing controlled brush fires. It also saves us money on not having to hire fire weather consulting help.”
- X “I used to call the weather office and ask them for advice, but now I can take care of my questions myself without bothering your busy forecasters. Thanks a bunch and keep up the good work.”
- X “Why can’t I save a user profile for the same queries which I use over and over again? It would save me a lot of time.”
- X “The Governor of the State of East Carolina has brought to my attention a service called the Weather Event Planner which is provided by the National Weather Service (NWS). I understand NWS is considering whether to continue this service. The Governor has made it clear that the East Carolina Department of Emergency Operations and the Department of Environmental Protection rely on this service and consider it critical to the safety of the citizens of East Carolina. As Chair of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies, I find it most disturbing that NWS would even consider discontinuing such a vital service. I urge you to continue this service.”
- X “You guys are killing me! I just made a major investment in a new product which will provide many advanced features for alerting customers to weather conditions of interest to them. My service is highly personalized, and includes a free (advertising supported) option which blows your Weather Activity Planner out of the water and a paid service with features like automatic notification when forecasts change (and others which I bet you haven’t even imagined). Ironically, I am using the NWS RSS feeds to NDFD as a primary source of weather information. So here I am only a few weeks away from product rollout, and all of my advertisers and investors are getting cold feet because the NWS provides this stone-age Weather Activity Planner interface. You guys need to terminate this service (and any others like it) and get out of the way of the private sector which can do this kind of thing way better than you can.”
- X "Finally! A presentation which allows the general public to better interpret the data you are already making publicly available. Thanks for allowing available technology to improve your service to the public much in the same way you did in switching from text-only to more graphical presentations of your forecasts."
- X “I can’t believe the weather service is even considering turning off the Weather Activity Planner. What do you think I pay my taxes for? If you shut down this service I will just have to conclude you are in cahoots with all the crooked politicians in Washington and the lobbyists who pay them to walk all over the little guy. Believe me, my Representative, Senator, and Governor are all going to hear about this.”

**Issues:**

- X Should NOAA support this information service, given that a similar one is available from the private sector?
- X Does it matter whether the private sector service uses the NWS-provided NDFD or a different source for the underlying weather forecast information?
- X Is an application which allows a user to independently query a NOAA-provided database acceptable under the Partnership Policy or should that function be left to the private sector?
- X What is your response to those who would oppose your decision based on the comments they provided?

**Example of Weather Activity Planner display**  
 Taken from NWS Kansas City / Pleasant Hill, MO WFO web site  
<http://www.crh.noaa.gov/ifps/wxplanner.php?site=eax>

Experimental Weather Activity Planner for 39.32 -93.97

Interactive

Locations within 5 miles of this gridpoint include...Richmond MO

**Weather Activity Planner**

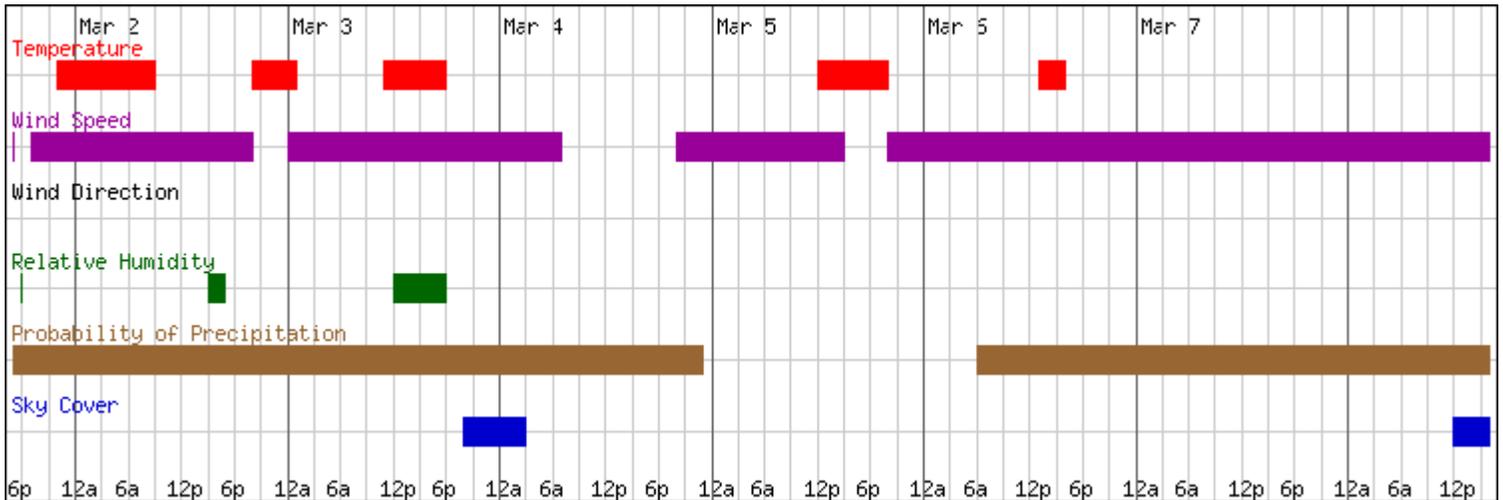
This interactive forecast display is experimental and is intended for general planning purposes. Data entered may have been changed for accuracy. Please verify the below data is appropriate.

Temperature (°F) <input type="text" value="50"/> Min to <input type="text" value="60"/> Max Rel. Humidity (%) <input type="text" value="20"/> to <input type="text" value="40"/>	Wind Speed (mph) <input type="text" value="5"/> to <input type="text" value="15"/> Wind Direction (clockwise-compass) <input type="text"/> to <input type="text"/>	Sky Cover (%) <input type="text" value="0"/> to <input type="text" value="20"/> Prob. Precipitation (%) <input type="text" value="0"/> to <input type="text" value="20"/>
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Latitude

Longitude

Colors highlighted on graph below represent the times when the weather criteria above have been met.



[Link to 48-hr Element Meteogram](#)